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ANTAL DORATI

Rimsky-Korsakov

Suite from "Le Coq d'Or"

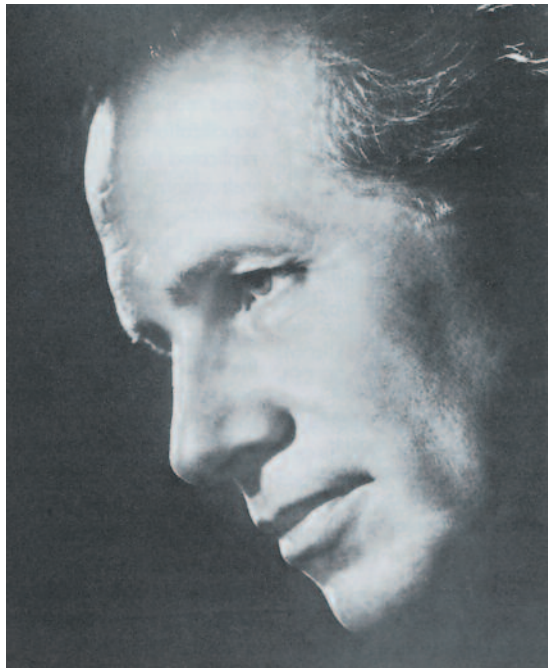
Capriccio Espagnol

Russian Easter Overture

Borodin

Polovtsian Dances from "Prince Igor"

London Symphony Orchestra



ANTAL DORATI

ANTAL DORATI conducting the **LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)

Capriccio Espagnol, Op. 34

1	1. Alborada	1:12
2	2. Variazioni	4:37
3	3. Alborada	1:12
4	4. Scena e canto gitano	4:59
5	5. Fandango asturiano	3:14

Suite from "Le Coq d'Or"

6	1. King Dodon in his Palace	8:55
7	2. King Dodon on the Battlefield	4:05
8	3. King Dodon with Queen Shemakha	6:28
9	4. Marriage Feast and Lamentable End of King Dodon	5:59
10	**Russian Easter Overture, Op. 36**	15:09

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

11	**Polovtsian Dances from "Prince Igor"**	11:16

London Symphony Orchestra Chorus

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DSD
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Associate engineer: Robert Eberenz (Coq d'Or, Russian Easter Festival Overture)
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RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: CAPRICCIO ESPAGNOL
SUITE FROM "LE COQ D'OR"
RUSSIAN EASTER OVERTURE
BORODIN: POLOVTSIAN DANCES FROM "PRINCE IGOR"

Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) was a fluent and prolific composer who liked nothing better than to sit quietly at his desk with a large manuscript before him, while he conjured up the fantastic and exotic orchestral colors that have become synonymous with his individual style.

During the summer of 1887, he interrupted his work on the orchestration of *Prince Igor*—the opera left incomplete at the death of his friend and fellow composer Alexander Borodin—to write a fantasy on Spanish themes. Rimsky-Korsakov acknowledges his debt to Mikhail Glinka, the first composer to utilize popular Spanish melodies in his *Jota Aragones* and *Noches de Madrid*. Originally, Rimsky-Korsakov intended his piece as a Fantasia for violin and orchestra, but the dance character of the Spanish themes furnished him with "rich material for putting in use multiform orchestral effects."

The *Capriccio Espagnol* is divided into five short movements: *Alborada,* a morning song typical of Spanish Galicia; an andante which is a set of variations on a languid *Seguidilla,* a dance of Seville; a reprise of the *Alborada* in C Major which mounts to A-flat in a magnificent solo for violin; an allegretto called in the score *Scena e canto gitano* (Scene and gypsy song), a progression of five cadenzas for brasses, violin, flute, clarinet, and harp interspersed with the rhythmic melody of the gypsy song, which mounts in dynamic emphasis until it erupts into the final *Fandango asturiano,* a dance of Asturias.

Rimsky-Korsakov makes a revealing statement regarding his score:

"The opinion formed by both critics and the public that the *Capriccio* is a `magnificently orchestrated piece'—is wrong. The *Capriccio* is a brilliant composition `for the orchestra.' The change of timbres, the felicitous choice of melodic designs and figuration patterns, exactly suiting each kind of instrument, brief virtuoso cadenzas for solo instruments, the rhythm of the percussion instruments, and so on, constitute here the very essence of the composition and not its garb of orchestration. The Spanish themes, of dance character, furnished me with rich material for putting in use multiform orchestral effects. All in all, the Caprice is undoubtedly a purely external piece, but vividly brilliant for all that."

These remarks and this musical philosophy were to have a great effect on Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil Igor Stravinsky (and the whole of modern composition), who developed the ideas of melodic-orchestral integration and instrumental autonomy with astonishing effect in the scores of *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*.

Le Coq d'Or, Rimsky-Korsakov's last stage work, brought to a close the Golden Age of Russian Opera, which extended for roughly three decades and included such operas as *Boris Godunov, Eugene Onegin, Prince Igor, The Queen of Spades,* and others.

Pushkin provided the inspiration for *Le Coq d'Or* with his thinly disguised satire on the court of Nicholas II and the Tsar's confused military leadership. There are oblique references to Russia's thorough beating at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Fleet during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, as well as devastating pictures of court life with its whining advisors, plotting ministers, and fawning courtiers. The authorities, always on the alert for "subversive" art, refused to pass on the production of *Le Coq d'Or* until some forty-five lines were cut. At first, Rimsky-Korsakov stood off the censors, but his librettist, Bielsky, demoted King Dodon to commander-in-chief to avoid comparisons with the Tsar, downgraded the commander-in-chief to a mere colonel, and changed the Golden Cockerel's theme from "Kiri-koo-koo! Reign lying on your side," to "Sleep peacefully in your bed."

Rimsky-Korsakov's wranglings with the government, so prophetic of the ordeals of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Miaskovsky, affected his health, and like Borodin, he died before witnessing the premiere in 1909 of his greatest opera.

Briefly, the story of *Le Coq d'Or* involves lazy King Dodon, an astrologer who presents the king with a golden cockerel whose crowing would awaken the court to an imminent danger, and the mysterious Queen Shemakha. The astrologer appears alone in the Prologue and Epilogue. In Act I, the enemy has invaded the country. Out of gratitude to the astrologer for his gift, King Dodon promises to grant his every wish. The act concludes with the crowing of the cockerel and the king marching off to war. In Act II, King Dodon's armies are defeated and his sons killed. Amid the battle's shambles, Queen Shemakha makes a strange appearance singing her famous Hymn to the Sun. King Dodon falls in love with her on the spot and takes her back with him as his bride. Act III begins with Dodon's triumphal return. One look at the attractive Queen Shemakha at the king's side, and the astrologer asks King Dodon to grant him a further wish: the queen's hand in marriage. Stupefied, King Dodon kills the astrologer, the golden cockerel flies down from its perch and pecks the king to death, and the queen disappears as mysteriously as she appeared, laughing oddly. In the Epilogue, the astrologer explains to the audience that it was all in jest, which led the English critic Martin Cooper to write that *Le Coq d'Or* "stands as an elegant, stylized question mark at the

end of Rimsky-Korsakov's long career."

In a letter to his publisher, B. P. Jurgenson, on May 16, 1908, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote: "What will you say to the following idea of mine? I have in mind making a small orchestral suite from *Le Coq d'Or,* similar to what I have in my *Christmas Eve.*

"This suite should also include the `Introduction' and `March' ... and several excerpts in addition: the beginning of Act II, the Dance, the Finale of Act II, the beginning of Act III and others. The suite will be in the form of a single rather long piece without a break."

Thus, the principal elements of the opera are embodied in the suite—a distinguished example of the orchestral genius of Rimsky-Korsakov.

Rimsky-Korsakov himself describes some of the sources and inspirations for his *Russian Easter Overture*: "The rather lengthy, slow introduction of the Overture on the theme of *Let God Arise!,* alternating with the ecclesiastical theme *The Angel of the Lord,* appeared to me, in its beginning, as it were, the ancient Isaiah's prophecy concerning the resurrection of Christ. The gloomy colours of the *Andante lugubre* seemed to depict the holy sepulchre that had shone with the ineffable light at the moment of resurrection—in the transition to the Allegro of the Overture. The beginning of the Allegro, *And His enemies fled before His face,* led to the holiday mood of the Greek Orthodox service on Christ's matins; the solemn trumpet voice of the Archangel was replaced by a tonal reproduction of the joyous, almost dance-like bell-tolling, alternating now with the sexton's rapid reading and now with the conventional chant of the priest's reading the glad tidings of the Evangel. The *obikhod** theme, *Christ is risen,* which forms a sort of subsidiary part of the Overture, appeared amid the trumpet blasts and the bell-tolling, constituting also a triumphant coda. In this Overture were thus combined reminiscences of the ancient prophecy, of the gospel narrative and also a general picture of the Easter service with its `pagan merry-making.' The capering and leaping of the biblical King David before the Ark, do they not give expression to a mood of the same order as the mood of the idol-worshippers' dance? Surely the Russian Orthodox *obikhod* is instrumental dance music of the church, is it not? And do not the waving beards of the priests and sextons clad in white vestments and surplices, and intoning *Beautiful Easter* in the tempo of *Allegro vivo,* etc., transport the imagination to pagan times? And all these Easter loaves and twists and the glowing tapers.... How far a cry from the philosophic and socialistic teaching of Christ! This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of the Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merry-making on the morn of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my Overture. Accordingly I requested Count Golyenishcheff-Kootoozov to write a program in verse—which he did for me. But I was not satisfied with his poem, and wrote in prose my own program, which same is appended to the published score. Of course in the program I did not explain my views and my conception of the `Bright Holiday,' leaving it to my tones to speak for me. Evidently these tones do, within certain limits, speak of my feelings and thoughts, for my Overture raises doubts in the minds of some hearers, despite the clarity of the music. In any event, in order to appreciate my Overture even ever so slightly, it is necessary that the hearer should have attended Easter morning-service at least once and at that, not in a domestic chapel, but in a cathedral thronged with people from every walk of life, with several priests conducting the service...."

*Obikhod of church singing is a collection of canticles of the Orthodox Church.

Some of the comments of Rimsky-Korsakov about the score of his Overture and others of his pieces reveal a deep feeling and an understanding of musical art and a broadness of view not common among the Russian composers of his time. But one must read between the lines.

It is important to note that Rimsky-Korsakov has shifted the ground of his explanation from the autonomy of music to its dependence on the life experience of the Orthodox Easter Service. One notices the frequent use of conditional, qualifying phrases, "... as it were ...", "... seemed to depict ...", "... tones ... within certain limits ... speak of feelings and thoughts...." The questionable conclusion of the last sentence is the result of a conventional musical language in the last century: the overemphasis of inspirations external to music.

The fashion to elaborate a "program" for music, that is, a story or literary association, often clouded the nature of the music itself. Often the 19th-century composer himself exaggerated the importance of the program by literary compositions that were elaborated *after* the musical score was completed, appendages that were superfluous and often in execrable taste.

Speaking of one art in terms of another is of course a great problem. The old school of composers chose the literary association; the more recent, such as the serial composers, have developed a technical language, the complexity and obscurity of which often exceeds the difficulty of their scores. But the practice of devising programs has fallen into such disfavor that it often evokes from modern critics of 19th-century music objections which obscure the innate value of the music.

Musically, the *Overture to the Russian Easter* is sufficient unto itself. It is a testament to the high standard the composer set for himself, particularly in the integration of his thematic material and his orchestration. Theoretically the use of an orchestral setting for an evocation of the Russian Orthodox services is precarious. Historically, instruments had been banned from the Orthodox Church for thousands of years; aesthetically the setting of the *obikhod* might be thought to destroy the fundamental simplicity of the chants. But the musical concept is so universal, resulting from the composer's subtle and tasteful instrumentation, that the Overture neither offends the religious sensibility nor betrays the composer's flair for tonal effects.

In 1876, Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) wrote to a friend: "I was never able to concentrate upon composition except during my summer holiday, or when some ailment compelled me to keep to my rooms." Inability to focus attention on musical projects for extended periods of time would appear to be the sign of an easygoing, dilettantish nature. This impression is fortified by a cursory examination of the composer's catalogue of works, among which are three unfinished operas, fragments of a symphony, and other instrumental compositions. As for complete works, the list is a modest one and of less than uniform quality. And yet, in the history of Russian music, Borodin, a potent "fifth" of the Mighty Five, made significant contributions to the development of a truly national school and, by extending the limits of tonality, helped pave the way for the progress of modern European music, particularly in France.

Borodin's reservoir of creative ideas was not shallow; it was merely diversified. Apart from his music, he was a dedicated and accomplished man of science and medicine: doctor, pathologist, chemist, and author of such learned theses as "The analogies between arsenious and phosphorous acid," a number of which were published in several languages.

Paradoxically, Borodin's largest and most important work remained

unfinished at the time of his death in 1887. The idea for the opera *Prince Igor* was suggested to him in 1869 by Vladimir Stassov, Glinka's mentor and a champion of the new Russian school. Based on an epic entitled "The Story of the Expedition of Igor," it provided the composer with a superb opportunity to pit two different musical styles and characters against each other: the Russian and the "Oriental."

As usual, work proceeded fitfully. No sooner had he begun outlining a libretto and writing some preliminary scenes, than he turned to other projects. In 1871, he composed the first movement of his Second Symphony, dabbled in an unsuccessful composite opera entitled *Mlada* in 1872, returned to his symphony, and completed his excellent string quartet in 1875. Finally, Borodin took up the thread of his opera and, in 1876, wrote to a friend:

"Whenever I have to mention this opera, I cannot help laughing at myself. I feel rather like the old wizard, Finn, in *Russlan and Ludmilla*, who, wrapt in his love for Naina, does not realize that time is flying and starts acting only when he and his beloved one are stricken in years.... So far I have felt shy of letting it be known that I am engaged on an opera. My real business, after all, is scientific work; and I feared lest by concentrating too much on music I discredit that work. But now, everybody knows; and I am, so to speak, in the same position as a girl who, having thrown her cap over the mill, has secured a certain amount of freedom: willy-nilly, I must finish *Igor*."

Nine years went by, however, and Borodin's cap was still in his hands. Even the warm reception afforded excerpts from *Igor* at the 1885 Belgian International Exhibition failed to spur him on. Two years later, Borodin died, and his friends Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazounov completed the opera.

Rimsky-Korsakov and Moussorgsky were "especially taken with the wild Eastern dances" from Act II, which Borodin composed in 1875. Their singling out of the Polovtsian Dances anticipated the worldwide acclaim for this most famous of all Borodin works. The contrasting moods of longing, savagery, and sheer lyric beauty, expressed in a modal, semi-oriental harmonic idiom, have made this scene one of the best known portions of opera regularly given in the concert hall.

Notes by Harold Lawrence
(Polovtsian Dances *and* Le Coq)
and John Scrymgeour
(Capriccio *and* Russian Easter)

ABOUT THIS RECORDING

The London Symphony Orchestra has a distinguished history dating back to 1904. It came into being when another orchestra, the Queen's Hall Orchestra, began losing its top musicians. It seems that the Queen's Hall Orchestra, one of the finest in England at the time, could not afford to provide permanent employment. Consequently, its musicians began migrating to the provinces for various festivals and accepting other assignments elsewhere. In that way, about fifty of the players left the orchestra. These, together with some fifty other "eminent instrumentalists," formed the London Symphony Orchestra.

The first concert of the London Symphony took place at the Queen's Hall on June 9, 1904, at the most improbable time of three o'clock on a Thursday afternoon! The conductor was the Austro-Hungarian Hans Richter, a friend and champion of Elgar and Strauss. During its first season, the orchestra was directed by such renowned conductors as Nikisch, Stanford, Elgar, and Colonne.

The London Symphony Orchestra's first trip outside England occurred in 1906 when it visited Paris. Afterwards, there were invitations from Belgium, the United States, and Canada. The last tour might have been the end of the

London Symphony Orchestra, for their passages were originally booked on the Titanic, but because of the great demand for berths on its maiden voyage, they were fortunately transferred to the ocean liner Baltic.

During the 1950s and '60s, a close affiliation developed between Antal Dorati, the London Symphony, and Mercury, which led to a steady revitalization of the Orchestra and a regular schedule of concerts in London as well as tours throughout Britain, Europe, Israel, and Japan. The Mercury Living Presence recordings with Dorati and the London Symphony have been widely acclaimed as among the finest ever made with the Orchestra.

When Mercury worked with the London Symphony Orchestra, the famous mobile recording truck was sent by boat to England, carrying, as always, all the necessary equipment—at least four recording machines, several microphones, miles of cable, monitor speakers, meters, blank tape, ropes, and other bits of odd paraphernalia, and its own generating system.

Walthamstow Town Hall, in both instances, was the recording auditorium. Three of the truck's extremely sensitive, omni-directional microphones were hung in a vertical plane, roughly, just outside the proscenium arch of the hall. They were tested prior to the session; at the time of the actual recording, several level checks were made, during which the orchestra played both soft and loud passages from the music they were to perform. When the overall adjustments had been made, there was no further modification on the part of the engineers. Maestro Dorati was responsible for the control of balance, nuance, and dynamics at all times; there was no electronic compression of climaxes or boosting of pianissimo sections. This technique, used in all Mercury Living Presence recordings, results in a completely *musical* performance.

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